

WHAT PRICE AUDIO-LINGUALISM?

by Frederick L. Jenks

Sufficient evidence exists to support the following statements: the fat years of governmental support for foreign language teaching are behind us; colleges and universities are opening their curricula and affording students optional routes to the baccalaureate; foreign language enrollments have either stabilized or slid downward; students have gained a foothold in university committees that make much institutional policy; foreign language teachers — those with B.A.'s and those with Ph.D.'s — compete side by side for jobs as bilingual secretaries and sales clerks; existing staffs in foreign language departments, swollen by the NDEA manna of the past, have been trimmed down to size. These statements do not contain one man's opinion. They can be so readily exemplified that it is unnecessary to present a "for instance."

The journals of our professional field have rehashed the symptoms, argued the causes, presented the results of surveys, and, by so doing, wasted a good deal of paper pulp. Where we are today is obviously a result of where we were yesterday and how we moved into tomorrow. Where we are today in foreign language education cannot be linked firmly to the permissiveness of parents, the assassination of leaders, nor to economic recessions. I know of no teacher of foreign languages who modified lessons significantly due to these factors. (It is worth mentioning at this point that the financial impetus for constructing language laboratories and for building a widespread network of aural-oral language programs came during a moderately strong recession during the late 50's.)

If we play God for a moment and look down upon a given human being's birth-to-adulthood living, the total pattern of his existence, we can see some important elements. First, we can notice that the person we have under our scrutiny spent twenty years getting ready to be an adult. Of these twenty years, the first ten at least were spent being silly and full of flighty behavior. Adults controlled and directed most of his existence for his own good as they saw it. The second ten he tried to take a hand in what happened to himself. If he was anything like the average person, this meant getting rid of the adult hands which were on him, a little more each year, until he could finally be responsible for and direct his own destiny. Fifteen of those twenty years were spent as a student. One-half of each year was

spent as an enrolled student. Approximately one-half of each day's "awake" hours were spent in a school. This roughs out to nearly four full years of around-the-clock formal schooling.

Second, from our heavenly perch we observe that non-school experiences play a primary role in that period of life. Since he spends more time in these activities than he does in school-related activities, and since he begins before reaching school age, and since he is mentally receptive as a result of his first hand, personal encounter with "learn and do, do and learn" operations, this treasure of achievements becomes a private asset of unknown proportions.

By temporarily entwining these two elements, we join the informal and formal educational components momentarily. When done, we notice that what transpires in the school relates to what the student will see elsewhere in school and outside of the formal learning environment. Furthermore, we see that what he has learned outside of the school has both kinetic and potential implications within the school.

No sooner do we intertwine these two observations than they unfasten themselves. As compatible as they may seem they just don't go together. The realities of life aren't compatible with the realities of education. We, the benign watchers, immediately slip off the cloud and land back in the teacher's lounge. Tomorrow, we'll shuffle off to our respective classes and labs and, as Laurel so often said to Hardy, " , , , be none the wiser for it."

Permit me to now invite you on a second journey. This trip will give us the feeling of a speeded-up film or, if you will ponder this bit of Pedagese, "a multi-sensory, accelerated, confrontation with educational reality." Let us pretend that we are masquerading in the form of boys and girls of school age. We begin our trip at the age of eight and end the trip at twenty-one.

In the elementary classroom, we fingerpaint, write, run and play, argue, build things, and talk to each other. Once in a while we sing about animals, people, and good times. Every so often, a language teacher pops in to teach us a song whose words mean nothing. We don't fingerpaint, write, run and play, argue, build things or talk to each other when the FLES teacher takes over.

Our voices change and our bodies re-configure themselves. This must be junior high school. We fall in love with anyone and anything for three days in a row. We learn to saw wood, bake cookies, make flour paste relief maps, cut up flower stems, measure objects, tell jokes, apply etiquette lessons, and control our physical movements. Three times a week, we go to a room down the hall where we memorize strange sounding lines, repeat them back to the teacher, get an A, and sit quietly. Hold it, it's a new year and a new language

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teacher! Now we just sit quietly while she conjugates things called "infinitives." (They're called that because when they are declined, they stretch toward infinity.)

Everyone else is older than we are. This is high school. We talk a lot, eat perpetually, cut up frogs, learn to type, arrange pulleys to see how objects can be easily lifted, build models of molecules from round, multi-colored pieces, play the clarinet in the band, build a lamp, perform a minor part in a classroom one-act play, write a poem, and . . . stop the action. It's the foreign language class. It's audio-lingual time. We sit in our rows, we listen, we repeat (whole class, one-half class, individually), we read what we learned to say (interesting stuff like, "Bonjour, Andre." "Bonjour, Jacques." "Comment vas-tu?" "J'al mal au foie." "C'est dommage." "Au revoir, Andre." "A demain, Jacques.")). Three times a week, we go to our respective stalls, look at our friends' necks, put on headphones, and listen to a taped recording of a man who speaks at high speeds a language different from that spoken by our female teacher from Montreal. We learn that the odds are heavily in favor of our not being heard when we say something into the microphone. If we're heard, it's for fifteen seconds and we'll know it's performance time. (There's always a barely audible click when she turns me on).

Since we're standing in a registration line, this must be college. Our first experience with Sociology, Economics, Plant Morphology, British Fiction. Isn't it comforting to have foreign languages to fall back on. Even though we have to take it, it will afford us some breathing room in a hectic schedule. However, maybe we should have taken more than two years in high school of the foreign language. After all, we learned to say a lot of things and earned A's for our oral efforts. Also, if we had taken just one more year, we wouldn't have had to take any foreign languages at college. You know, that's like taking a bit of arsenic every day so that, after several years, we'll never have to fear being poisoned by an overdose of it.

My goodness, what is this that he's teaching us? Is it French or Martian? Here we sit while a twenty-two year old teaching assistant dictates thirteen rules for the use of the imperfect tense. What on earth does "action that continues in the past" mean? We had better go to the language laboratory to get further explanations via the tapes. What is this that I hear? These are the old familiar words from my high school language class. But, what does that have to do with the imperfect? Chaos reigns supreme in foreign language teaching. This is all for us! Ten years of school and we still don't know a foreign language. End of trip.

Let's face it. Foreign language courses aren't proud examples of educational refinement. Those of us who survived to become language

majors might be academic deviates. We developed the ability to endure boredom, lack of activity, ambiguity, and inconsistency. While, in most of our classes, we were doing things, making things, communicating with others, we were doing little, making nothing, and communicating primarily with the language teacher in language class.

In other classes, we were watching films, viewing slides and transparencies, listening to and making tapes, and really using machines. In foreign language classes, we did the absurd . . . we talked to a tape-recorded voice when a bell rang and a pause followed. It never talked back, it never answered the question that we asked; no one ever heard us.

What price audio-lingualism? As practiced by many, it lacks spontaneity, and it lacks action. It has not been universally and homogeneously practiced by teachers. It is the victim of misinterpretations and misapplications. It is at the mercy of diverse facilities and schedules. It pays off in the long run only, since its goals are lofty and distant. It is the whipping boy for those of us who failed to observe what was transpiring in other areas of the curriculum. Our classes, and our approaches, weren't competing equally for students' energy and interests. The question which concerns us presently is: how do we go about providing the kinds of educational experiences and opportunities that might accelerate the language learning process while heightening student interest simultaneously? Neither you nor I have the solution, but as we struggle to concoct strategies and plans which we will later test out with students, we can be guided by the following principles and the accompanying suggestions for language educators and technologists:

1. *Experimental learning is more effective than cognitive learning.* Doing is more effective than talking about doing. What one learns empirically, that is, by living through it, is better retained than what one learns by simple memorizing. When one is an active participant, one brings all his senses into play. He has to act out what might otherwise only remain in the mind as a possibility. For the language teacher, this means teaching for communication. It means involvement for the student; for example, role-playing, impromptu and situational dialog tasks: it means audio-lingual techniques leading to personalized discourse. For the language laboratory director, it means closer involvement with the ongoing work of the classroom. It means that aural materials must have an element of surprise. It means that tapes must provide language experiences that are unique, additive to the classwork, and not merely repetitious of it.

2. *Personal involvement and willingness to help carry out a plan is related to one's sharing the making of that plan.* We are more likely to go along with a plan if we have had a hand in formulating it.

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Even at the college level, we must include students in our planning if they are to fully subscribe to that which they will be asked to do. This process of using your mind for your own good is in itself a teaching goal in every school everywhere. For the language educator, this implies that the student's individual learning objective, if it is considered adequate by the teacher, can be met within the confines of the language requirement. If he wants to learn to read newspapers, a program must be made available: if he wants to listen to and understand Italian Opera, he can learn to do so. It requires that the language laboratory have short-term, achievable objectives ready to be reached via video, and multi-media components. The laboratory must again become a site of educational experimentation and discovery, or we risk losing the privilege of being called a laboratory.

3. *Environments affect people.* Environments affect learning. All of us are affected by the environment where we live, learn and work. If we happened to learn Spanish in a musty, flaky-walled, dimly lit, rickety-desked classroom, there is strong likelihood that our attitude toward language study was negatively affected. This is more true today than it was during the one-room schoolhouse era. Bleak as they were, they were not dissimilar from the student's homes. Is the language laboratory in which you work environmentally oppressive? Do the rows of carrels remind students of a stable? Are the ceilings more than ten feet high? The language laboratory can undergo cosmetic surgery for the sake of acquiring *ambiente*. De-centralization of carrels, conversation areas containing padded chairs and end tables, and roving advanced language students in search of needy novices might mark the beginning of the face lift. A walk to the maintenance office during June might reveal that there is a supply of surplus paint in bright, crisp colors. If the laboratory is due for a coat of the familiar colors — mildew gray, callous tan, or sweatsock white — a plea for livelier colors might be rewarded. Posters, displays of student art, foreign periodicals, etc., might give students a reason for coming to the laboratory twice instead of once. Computer trunks, videotaped presentations of plays and language classes, music, tapes of lectures in other subject areas, of featured speakers' presentations, of dramatic presentations could all be made available. In short, the laboratory must tap resources now flowing to education technology centers.

4. A last scientific principle we should keep foremost in our thinking as we grope for contemporary approaches is that *time is an all important factor and that it must be differentially considered*. John Carroll, a psychologist concerned with learning theory, defines aptitude as "the amount of time required by the learner to attain mastery of a learning task." He defines perserverance as the "time

the learner is willing to spend in learning." (1963). If all of our students are to master the learning tasks we set for them, and Carroll holds that at least ninety percent of our students can master any given task, then we need to take some measure of the individual willingness of the student to spend time in pursuit of learning something, and to provide more time for learning for those students who need it. To the foreign language educator, this principle strikes directly at his personal philosophy of education. It suggests that we must grade students and arrange material not as *we* believe they should be distributed, but rather as the students are able to learn. This doesn't mean that we must set an individual program of studies for each student. It does mean that we cannot have one program of studies for all students who take foreign languages as a graduation requirement. It implies that we, the foreign language specialists, should recognize that student majors and non-majors don't need the same program during the first two years of study. It means that oral proficiency is, in all probability, an unreachable goal in the required course sequence. (It suggests that realistic speaking, listening, reading or de-coding, and writing objectives be offered.) The truth is that a huge number of universities have no specific learning objectives for the required courses other than a requisite of passing the final, department-wide examination. One final word on behalf of the many students who hate language study and who flunk. Students who are informed of a course's objectives in advance achieve more learning than those who are not aware of the goals. (Doty, 1969). Wouldn't it pay off instantaneously if language students knew what they were doing, why they were doing it, and where it would lead in addition to enjoying the tasks?

NB Audio-lingualism hasn't taken into account the several principles mentioned earlier. In all fairness to the "Method," however, it must be added that these principles are more overlooked by the practitioner than by the practice. While other courses in the curriculum were opening into the previously masked light of student involvement, foreign language teachers filtered it and distorted it by equating involvement with moving mouths. Given choices, students move toward active learning. Surprise, or discovery, plays an important role in learning. Can we compete with the excitement generated when a student distills alcohol in the Chemistry class? I believe that we can, and must. We have tarried too long with the mechanizations of a method when, instead, we should have begun to build upon it. We have held dear for roughly two decades an approach which, at the very best, was in need of refinement. We must move through audio-lingualism to other experiences. Stated in different terms, we must spread and apply aural-oral activities over a longer period of time

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while adding other dimensions of language study to the program from the first year of study. What, for example, might these dimensions be? They might range from making a tamale to writing for travel brochures, from listening to foreign pop records to finding out about Napoleon's physical ailments. They include any activity that can be related to the foreign people, culture, and language. It's ours to teach.

What price audio-lingualism? Let's give this starlet of Twentieth Century foreign language methodology a fair shake. She's like "Little Orphan Annie" in many respects. She's no youngster anymore but no one has permitted her to grow up. She isn't a great deal different from her 1948 or 1950 portrait even though she occasionally wears different outfits. Let's let audio-lingualism mature. She may have more to offer as a lady than she does, or did, as a child. Certainly her personality and character will change as she gains new and bolder features. But, perhaps in coming years, we can fondly repeat the commercial's conclusion, "she's not older, she's better."

John Carroll. "A Model of School Learning" *Teachers College Record*. (Columbia University, 1963, Vol. 64.) pp. 723-733.

C. P. Doty. "The Effect of Practice and Prior Knowledge of Educational Objective's on Performance." Diss. Ab. 3035A, 1969.

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